

COUNTDOWN IRAQ For March 5, 2003 MSNBC March 5, 2003 Wednesday

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GUESTS: Mark Regev; Hassan Abdel Rahman; James Yacovelli; Duncan Hunter; General Wayne Downing; Kay Bailey Hutchison; Robert McFarlane

**HIGHLIGHT:**

The first suicide bombing in two months kills 15 Israelis, mostly high school and college students. Who's to blame: Israeli Prime Minister Sharon or the Palestinian authority?

**BODY:**

ANNOUNCER: Tonight, a special edition of the COUNTDOWN. Endgame: Iraq -- the clock is ticking, just days from a showdown at the U.N. and possibly a few weeks away from a showdown with Iraq.

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Tonight, COUNTDOWN correspondents in the Persian Gulf, Middle East and Europe explore what's at stake for each country.

Then, the COUNTDOWN looks at the gamble the U.S. is making on the outcome of the vote, with our guests General Wayne Downing and Texas Senator Kay Bailey Hutchison.

From Washington, the Persian Gulf, and around the world, this is a special edition of COUNTDOWN: IRAQ - The Endgame. Here is Lester Holt.

LESTER HOLT, HOST: Good evening everyone. Welcome to this special edition of COUNTDOWN: Iraq. Tonight it appears the endgame is in fact near. We're just two days away from a key D-day or deadline day, if you will. That's what Chief Weapons Inspector Hans Blix reports to the U.N. Security Council.

Next week, the U.S. will decide whether to seek a U.N. vote and shortly thereafter, the military showdown could begin. Here's the day's developments in your "COUNTDOWN: Rundown." (BEGIN VIDEOTAPE)

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

DOMINIQUE DE VILLEPIN, FRENCH FOREIGN MINISTER (through translator): The Security Council will not vote for a second resolution that opens the door to the use of force.

HOLT (voice-over): War? No. France's Foreign Minister and his counterparts from Germany and Russia holding firm today in opposing the U.S.-backed resolution authorizing war against Iraq.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

COLIN POWELL, U.S. SECRETARY OF STATE: Still hasn't made the strategic choice to comply and disarm.

HOLT: Powell Play -- the Secretary of State blasting Saddam and permanent members of the Security Council today for failing to back demands laid out in resolution 1441. He also announced new evidence of Iraq's deception of Inspectors.

GENERAL TOMMY FRANKS, U.S. ARMY: Our troops in the field are trained, they're ready, they are capable.

HOLT: And ready to roll -- the man in charge of any military action in Iraq, General Tommy Franks, saying today that the U.S. is in position to provide a military option to diplomacy if the president gives him the order.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

HOLT: More than 100 NBC correspondents and contributors are spread out in key locations covering the showdown.

Tonight's World Briefing comes from these hot spots -- at the State Department, Andrea Mitchell is tracking the game of diplomatic chicken; Secretary of State Colin Powell offering more evidence today of Iraqi deception.

From Qatar the COUNTDOWN's Kelly O'Donnell with Arab leaders in search of their own diplomatic endgame to the crisis. Don Teague in Kuwait watching the military massed by the thousands with no sign of a slowdown.

And inside Baghdad, Ron Allen on Iraqis living with the fear of knowing a powerful U.S. military is massing nearby and poised to strike. (END VIDEOTAPE) (on camera) Let's begin our coverage, however, with the story just developing at this it hour, NBC news has learned the United States has just requested the immediate departure of two Iraqi attaches allegedly engaged in activities outside their official functions deemed harmful.



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Let's go to the State Department now and a report from Andrea Mitchell on today's diplomatic developments.

(BEGIN VIDEOTAPE)

ANDREA MITCHELL, NBC NEWS, WASHINGTON (voice-over): The U.N. today said Iraq not only destroyed nine more al-Samoud missiles that have ranges longer than permitted but also showed inspectors casting chambers that had been cut up making it impossible to produce a different kind of missile. The secretary of state said recent U.S. intelligence proves Iraq is lying.

POWELL: From recent intelligence, we know that the Iraqi Regime intends to declare and destroy only a portion of its banned al-Samoud inventory; and that it has in fact ordered the continued production of the missiles that you see being destroyed.

MITCHELL: And Powell said Iraq is still moving weapons of mass destruction around the country deceiving the Inspectors. Only an hour earlier, Chief Weapons Inspector Hans Blix had praised Iraq's destruction of the al-Samouds.

HANS BLIX, CHIEF U.N. WEAPONS INSPECTOR: Well clearly, the missiles are real disarmament. They are weapons that can be used in war and are destroyed in fairly large quantities.

MITCHELL: And today, Saddam Hussein told his Generals that the U.N. order to destroy the al-Samouds is a ploy to demoralize Iraq. He said the missile threatens no one, asking, is it supposed to be that an additional 10 or 12 kilometers would allow us to hit Israel?

But the U.S. plans to challenge Iraq's claims at the U.N. Friday, hoping to rattle European critics. Today the French, Russians and Germans all Security Council members escalated their campaign against the second U.N. resolution.

DE VILLEPIN: (SPEAKING IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE)

MITCHELL: The French minister said we will not allow a resolution to pass that authorizes force.

But will they use their veto?

ARI FLEISCHER, WHITE HOUSE PRESS SECRETARY: I urge you not to leap to the conclusion that this is a determined matter and that a veto will follow. This is part and parcel of diplomacy.

MITCHELL (on camera): All this will come to a head when Blix and Powell face off at the U.N. on Friday setting the stage for a possible vote on that new U.N. resolution next week -- Lester.

(END VIDEOTAPE)

HOLT: Andrea Mitchell of the State Department tonight.

The Bush administration making it clear today that Iraq has done nothing that would warrant giving Saddam Hussein more time. Tonight the military option remains front and center.

Let's go to the North Lawn of the White House now with the COUNTDOWN's Bob Kur is standing by live.

Bob, the president met with congressional leaders. He met with Tommy Franks. Is the only thing to decide right now the timing of war and not the decision of whether to launch it?

BOB KUR, NBC NEWS: Timing and tactics, Lester is what it has pretty much come down to. How soon and whether, for example, the administration does go to the United Nations and seek another vote. How soon can war really come, given the fact that Turkey so far is not letting the U.S. base troops and equipment in Turkey?

So how soon can the go-ahead actually come? That's something that the president discussed today with top military brass, including General Tommy Franks, the commander who will head the war effort over there -- also with Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld here at the White House today.

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The strong sense one gets here at the White House, Lester, is that whatever happens or does not happen, at the United Nations next week, this is a President that wants to move forward quickly; wants to get on with it. If the U.N. doesn't go well, wants to cut his diplomatic losses, whatever they are, and just give the go ahead.

HOLT: All right. NBC's Bob Kur at the White House tonight. Bob, thanks very much.

And behind the scenes at the White House, also keeping pressure on congressional leaders to maintain their support. joining us live from Washington now Republican Senator Kay Bailey Hutchison of Texas. Senator, thanks for joining us.

SEN. KAY BAILEY Hutchison (R), TEXAS: Thank you, Lester.

HOLT: What is your sense, right now, about the timing of war or any inevitability of war?

HUTCHISON: I think it is inevitable and I think it is close. The only thing that would stop this war is if Saddam Hussein was asked to leave and did leave with his family from Iraq. Otherwise, I think it is going to happen.

HOLT: If the White House-- if the administration walks away from the diplomatic table, doesn't get the go ahead it needs, should it just move straight ahead or do you envision a deadline being laid down for Saddam Hussein?

HUTCHISON: Well, I think that the deadlines have been laid out.

I think that we will probably hear, of course, on Friday from Hans Blix and then I think the question is whether there will be another resolution and I think after that we either go forward without that or we go through that process and we then go forward even if it doesn't pass with the required number.

HOLT: Senator, I'm sure by now many Americans fully expecting that war is a real possibility. At the same time, has the administration adequately prepared the American public for war in all that that could entail?

HUTCHISON: I do think President Bush has done that and I think he will continue to do that. He knows that this is a very tough decision and I know he doesn't want to go to war but he also knows that we must be prepared, we must let the -- let everyone know in the world that when America says they're going to do something, they're going to do it.

I think that the terrorists thought we had a short attention span. Well, we don't. We have a long attention span and we're going to win the war on terrorism and we're going to take weapons of mass destruction out of Iraq.

HOLT: Should the administration feel embarrassed? The president went to the U.N. in September, laid out an eloquent case, got a 15-0 vote in November only to bring it to this point, risking veto; can't seem to come up with the nine votes. How did it get here?

HUTCHISON: Well, I don't think it is an embarrassment for President Bush. I think that some of the countries that have allowed this to happen like Germany and France and Russia now, they've been talking a different game.

They have given Saddam Hussein an out. They have not spoken with a clear voice from the free world that you can't have weapons of mass destruction; you can't mess around with the U.N. The voice has not been united and I don't think it's an embarrassment for President Bush. I think he is trying to unite, he's doing everything possible but I think that these countries have sold some of these weapons and some of the paraphernalia to Iraq and they know that and I think they are concerned about it.

HOLT: Senator Kay Bailey Hutchison, thank you so much for joining us tonight.

Now, from politics to politics of diplomacy joining us live from Washington Robert McFarlane, national security adviser to President Ronald Reagan.

Mr. McFarlane, good evening to you and thanks for joining us.



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ROBERT MCFARLANE, FMR. NATIONAL SECURITY ADVISER: Thank you, Lester.

HOLT: What are the administration's options in your view right now?

MCFARLANE: I believe the President from the beginning looks at this issue based on common sense. Lester, in your block -- in your neighborhood if there was a maniac with an assault weapon you wouldn't go to the United Nations or even your city council. You would want him locked up right away and that is what has driven President Bush from the beginning and he intends to get results. He was willing and agreeable to trying to engender allies on our side, if they don't accept that same common sense that he has got to protect the American people.

(CROSSTALK)

HOLT: Are you suggesting then going to the U.N., drawing it out this long has been a mistake in this case?

MCFARLANE: Well, I think it was a sign of goodwill and the hope for persuasion of other allies, but there's a very different mindset driving Europeans and others and it has very little to do with Iraq. It is egocentrism on the part of President Chirac looking to his own future position of leadership in Europe and doesn't have much to do with Iraq. The president, however, is charged with protecting you and me, and that's what he intends to do, whatever the United Nations may say.

HOLT: Mr. McFarlane, a lot of people around the world have been focused looking for that proverbial smoking gun which hasn't been discovered yet. Do you think it will be found in war or immediately following a war and will all of the critics suddenly be applauding the President for going unilaterally?

MCFARLANE: Well, Lester, when the Iraqis create a military unit whose job is to deceive the Inspectors as they have, which was part of Secretary Powell's report, there's not much prospect that inspectors will ever do any good. And again, if the assault weapon on your block is a real danger, are you going to send an inspector after it? Come on, let's get serious here.

HOLT: But the flipside, what if nothing is found? Can the U.S. repair the damage?

MCFARLANE: Lester, I think we will find when we get there, quite a lot, and that evidence will be very compelling to any doubters today.

HOLT: Robert McFarlane, good to have you on tonight. Thank you.

MCFARLANE: A pleasure, Lester

HOLT: His music videos are playing from Kabul to Cairo on the COUNTDOWN At 45.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

(voice-over) An Iraqi pop star who's bringing a message of peace to America.

And next hour on the COUNTDOWN, Pat Buchanan and Bill Press talk to Congressman Duncan Hunter, chair of the House Armed Services Committee. That's ahead on the COUNTDOWN next hour.

ANNOUNCER (voice-over): Up next on the COUNTDOWN -- the Military Endgame. What are the options for the U.S. to disarm Iraq by force? A military briefing coming up next from Desert Storm Veteran General Wayne Downing.

Then, the Waiting Game -- how much longer can U.S. troops afford to wait for the President to give the green light for war? The COUNTDOWN's Don Teague reports on U.S. troops on standby in the Persian Gulf. (END VIDEO CLIP)

You're watching a special edition of COUNTDOWN: Iraq on MSNBC. (COMMERCIAL BREAK)

HOLT: Welcome back as we continue to look at the possible endgame with Iraq.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

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(voice-over) Let's start this segment with a COUNTDOWN headcount. As of today word from the Pentagon is 228,000 U.S. troops are in the Gulf region and parts of Europe preparing for war with Iraq, that includes 13,000 soldiers from the 101st Airborne deployed to Kuwait today.

Within 10 days the remaining 3,200 from their division will follow. From the Pentagon the COUNTDOWN's Jim Miklaszewski with more on the latest military developments. (END VIDEO CLIP) (BEGIN VIDEOTAPE)

JIM MIKLASZEWSKI, NBC NEWS, THE PENTAGON (voice-over): From remote desert air strips and aircraft carriers in the Persian Gulf, American war planes took off today in a dress rehearsal for war. Flying nearly 700 separate missions over Southern Iraq; more than three times the normal number of flights. U.S. military officials report that within days, American war planes could launch major air strikes against Iraqi military targets in the southern no fly zone. Bigger than the last significant air attack two years ago to further weaken Iraqi air defenses.

At the White House today, General Tommy Franks who would lead the military campaign, laid out the latest war plans. It could be his last face-to-face meeting with the president before the start of a war.

FRANKS: If the president of the United States decides to undertake military operations, with the coalition mentioned by the Secretary, there is no doubt we will prevail.

MIKLASZEWSKI: Franks briefed the president on the latest backup plans if the Turkish government continues to deny U.S. troops the right to invade Northern Iraq through Turkey. Instead, the 101st Airborne, with their apache helicopters, would drop into several airfields in Northern Iraq. NBC News has learned that American troops already in Iraq are working frantically with Kurdish forces to improve at least two air strips near Suda Minia (ph).

If there is a war, the U.S. could drop this brand new weapon, the MOAB, seen here in photos obtained exclusively by NBC news. Nicknamed "the mother of all bombs," it's the U.S. military's biggest conventional weapon, 21,000 pounds.

Like its predecessor, the Daisy Cutter, its blast would create a huge mushroom cloud and could be used for its shock value alone -- dropped well away from any populated areas. Despite the hang-ups with Turkey and the U.N., the U.S. military is fully preparing for a war that could begin within the next two to three weeks -- Lester.

(END VIDEOTAPE)

HOLT: Jim Miklaszewski.

Joining us now to talk about the possible military endgame is retired U.S. Army General Wayne Downing who served as commander in chief of special operations during Desert Storm.

General, thanks for coming on tonight. What about that two weeks? Do you think it is plausible now given what we know about the buildup? Are the right troops in the right places now?

GEN. WAYNE DOWNING, U.S. ARMY: Well, it sure seems two to three weeks looks like it might be right. This deal with the Turks not granting access, they're going to have to do some work arounds on that but they know how to do that.

HOLT: Does the Iraqi army have any comprehension of the kind of war the U.S. is ready to unleash?

DOWNING: Well I think they do. I think they're going to take what happened to them in 1991 and probably square that. They know they're going to get hammered badly and they also know that there is no way that they'll turn this back.

HOLT: General, there's a lot on the plate here. There is defending ally countries from scud missiles, there's seizing oil fields, there's regime change. What are the early objectives in the early hours of any war?

DOWNING: Well, I think there are going to be several.



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I mean, one they're going to want to take out the integrated air defense system and they are definitely want to get after the weapons of mass destruction, the storage sites, the missiles, the artillery units that might deliver that. And then you've got the regime change. If you're going to go after Saddam Hussein you're going to go after where he sleeps, where he hangs out. You're going to go after the command and control that he uses and you're also going to go after those units that protect him. And then you're going to just keep going after him and going after him until you get him.

Because this time, you know, the objective is not ejecting the Iraqi arm from Kuwait, this time it is regime change -- we've got to get this guy and we've got to get all of those key people around him. So I know they've got a plan for that.

HOLT: General, in recent history, Afghanistan -- the first goal for the U.S. suffered casualties; nothing clearly on the scale of what we saw in Vietnam and Korea. Is this war going to be different given the number of objectives we've talked about? It is not like trying to necessarily push the army out of Kuwait as happened 12 years ago.

DOWNING: Well, listen, we've been incredibly lucky in the last Gulf War and in Afghanistan, so we should not take those as norms. I mean, there's a very real possibility we're going to take more casualties this time, especially if this guy uses chemical weapons and biological weapons and I really think he's going to use some of these chemical weapons he has got with his artillery in his short-range missile units, so the front line troops are going to be subject to being slimed which is what they call a gas attack. Then we've got to worry about some of the rear areas.

HOLT: General Wayne Downing good to have you on. Thanks for coming on tonight.

DOWNING: Thanks, Lester.

HOLT (voice-over): Up next in this special edition of COUNTDOWN: Iraq the long wait for U.S. troops in the Gulf. How are they holding up? And tonight's COUNTDOWN Question -- Anti-war protests two weeks ago were the largest since: the Gulf War, the Kosovo Conflict, or the Vietnam War? The answer on your Showdown Lowdown.

HOLT: For U.S. troops overseas the crisis in Iraq has become a waiting game as diplomacy plays out its hand. In Kuwait the COUNTDOWN's Don Teague on the likely endgame for U.S. forces.

(BEGIN VIDEOTAPE)

DON TEAGUE, NBC NEWS: Here in Kuwait the buildup of American forces continues. There are now an estimated 120,000 U.S. troops in country with more arriving everyday. I've spoken with about a hundred Soldiers and Marines here over the last couple of months and individually their concerns fall into two major categories, both involving Saddam Hussein.

The first is that he will attack U.S. troops with chemical or biological weapons. The second is that his troops will pull back into populated areas, places like Baghdad, forcing the kind of street-to-street and building-to-building fighting that they would very much like to avoid. As for the hopes, well, they can be summed up in two words -- swift victory.

The soldiers and Marines I've spoken with are very confident in their technology and their training and they say if a war happens, they hope it will end quickly, either way, whether it's war or peace, when you talk to the individuals on the ground the men and women, they just say they want it over with so they can go home. Now back to you.

(END VIDEOTAPE)

HOLT: Don Teague in Kuwait City.

Coming up, next a deadly bombing in Israel raises new concerns. Can the Israelis protect themselves against suicide bombers and attacks from Iraq?

On the COUNTDOWN at 45: what's the endgame for the veto holding Security Council members.

Iraq's king of pop hoping to make it big now in America.

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And a special Showdown Lowdown on the peace movement, those trying to slow down war.  
(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

ANNOUNCER: Ahead on the COUNTDOWN next hour: money from America going to Osama bin Laden, charges that a Muslim cleric used a Brooklyn mosque to help funnel millions to al Qaeda. Should American mosques be shut down?

Pat Buchanan and Bill Press tackle the issue in the next hour of the COUNTDOWN.

HOLT: Welcome back to this special edition of the COUNTDOWN, as we focus on the possible end game in the showdown with Iraq.

Persian Gulf states have an important stake in the outcome. They are hoping to ensure stability in the region without U.S. intervention and perhaps without Saddam Hussein. Averting U.S. military intervention has been their first priority, keeping the peace among neighbors also a goal. Finally, some countries want to see Saddam Hussein step down.

We have two reports from the region, beginning with the COUNTDOWN's Kelly O'Donnell, who reports on a raucous meeting of Gulf states today in Qatar.

(BEGIN VIDEOTAPE)

KELLY O'DONNELL, NBC CORRESPONDENT: Good evening, Lester.

A summit called to talk about peace, but the most notable exchange today: a war of words, name-calling between Iraq and Kuwait. This was an emergency meeting of the 56-nation Islamic Conference. They represent Muslims from around the world: Asia, Africa and here in the Middle East.

When Iraq's deputy to Saddam Hussein was speaking, he grew angry when he thought Kuwait was interrupting. The Iraqi was talking about Kuwait's cooperation with the United States. In an angry outburst, in Arabic, the Iraqi representative said to Kuwait -- and we're quoting here -- "Shut up, you minion, you U.S. agent, you monkey. You are addressing Iraq. You are insolent. You are a traitor to the Islamic nation."

Well, Kuwait responded, they needed an apology, but Iraq fired back, "I curse your mustache." Mustache, in the Arab-speaking world, is apparently a reference to cursing the man's honor. They were tense moments. And when this meeting was over, there was no breakthrough development, the Islamic Conference saying they hope for peace and they urge Saddam Hussein to cooperate with U.N. inspectors.

I'm Kelly O'Donnell in Doha, now heading north to George Lewis in Turkey.

(END VIDEOTAPE)

(BEGIN VIDEOTAPE)

GEORGE LEWIS, NBC CORRESPONDENT: Kelly, the big concern for Turkey's leaders is what should be their level of participation in a war against Iraq. Nine out of 10 Turks oppose war. And, in line with that, the parliament here last Saturday voted to turn down the presence of up to 62,000 U.S. troops here for the purpose of opening up a northern front strike against Iraq.

But, today, the chief of staff of Turkey's military said perhaps the parliament ought to reconsider, noting that, if Turkey does go along with U.S. war plans, it would then receive the billions of dollars in U.S. aid expected to compensate Turkey for the damage caused by the war. According to chief of staff Hilmi Ozkok, the war will be shorter if a second front is opened from the north; pain will be diminished; there will be fewer unexpected developments and fewer people will lose their lives.

So, the hope here in Turkey is that, since war seems inevitable, that the war be a short one and it cause minimum disruption to this country's already volatile border regions.

(END VIDEOTAPE)

HOLT: George Lewis.



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Behind the scenes at the U.N., many countries are expressing doubts about whether the showdown will end peacefully.

Joining us now to talk about the possible end game is Raghida Dergham, COUNTDOWN contributor and diplomatic senior correspondent for "Al-Hayat" newspaper.

Raghida, thanks for joining us tonight.

Map it out for us. Russia, France and Germany say they are not going to let this resolution go forward. What happens on this point?

RAGHIDA DERGHAM, NBC ANALYST: And the spin that is being really cultivated by American diplomats is that, well, this doesn't mean that they're going to use a veto, which I'll get back to in a few minutes.

But the battle for the nine votes in the Security Council continues. And there is talk about that 48 hours and the way that it will be after adopting a resolution. And that would amount to giving a chance to Saddam Hussein only to step down or for those in Iraq interested to launch their coup, and increased talk about evacuation plans for U.N. personnel in Baghdad and in Iraq. And, of course, there is always the talk in the corridors that, no matter what Hans Blix, the head of UNMOVIC, says on Friday, the Blix report has become almost irrelevant, because the gathering there is that, look, the United States is going to war.

HOLT: Well, what about France and Russia? They didn't use the veto word. The U.S. is holding out some hope there. Are we watching a bluffing game going on here?

DERGHAM: Well, the American officials' point of view, the ones I spoke to, is that, look, they say: Watch their words carefully. And remember what happened before adopting Resolution 1441.

By that, they mean that they said they will oppose the resolution that speaks about authority to use force and they point out that the draft resolution does not have such language. It is very brilliant, in their words, in the sense that it does not put anybody on the spot in terms of authority. Others feel, no, watch out. They are too serious and the writing is clear on the wall.

However, the confrontation, whether it is a confrontation, diplomatic confrontation, or the conciliation of some kind, that will start on Friday.

HOLT: Raghida Dergham, always, thanks very much.

DERGHAM: Thank you.

HOLT: Saudi Arabia has been caught in the middle of this showdown. A U.S. ally, it also wants to protect ties to Arab neighbors who oppose a war. Still, it's likely to offer America use of a key air base.

The COUNTDOWN's Bob Arnot with an exclusive report.

(BEGIN VIDEOTAPE)

BOB ARNOT, NBC CORRESPONDENT: This is the Prince Sultan Air Base in the kingdom of Saudi Arabia. And it may be the single most important air base anywhere here in the region.

You are the deputy operational commander. Now, what kinds of planes do you have here that makes this such an important base and gives you such tremendous capabilities?

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE: We have JSTARS, which is a ground mapping radar airplane. We have tankers, the air refueling, that we can air refuel aircraft, heavy Spiders, Navy, Marine Corps, all the aircraft in the region. And we have Rivet Joint, which is an electronic collection device.

ARNOT: It really does eavesdropping. This airplane here, of course, is an AWACS, maybe the most famous of all of them, with that characteristic antenna up there.

There have been MiG incursions into the no-fly zone. What is the capability of this plane in terms of detecting those very fast, two-times-the-speed-of-sound fighter jets as they head toward American forces?

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UNIDENTIFIED MALE: Our primary platform is the radar. And we use that. And we have other systems on board to help us with the identification and then additional systems to help us send that picture back to our headquarters.

ARNOT: Great. Thank you very much.

Now, Lester, the key out here is that these are amazingly important assets. You wouldn't want to go to war without them. But the million-dollar question has been, will the Saudis allow this air base to be used? We talk to the Saudis, who basically say, we've always been friends to America. We talk to a number of commanders out here who say that, of course, it's not known yet what the Saudis will do, but they have been terrific hosts and have always come to the aid of the United States when in need.

(END VIDEOTAPE)

HOLT: Bob Arnot in Saudi Arabia.

A quick reminder: You're getting more of the COUNTDOWN each night. Coming up in our second hour, MSNBC's Pat Buchanan and Bill Press join me. On the agenda tonight: Secretary Powell says Saddam Hussein is trying to divide the United Nations. Chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, Congressman Duncan Hunter, weighs in on whether the U.S. should go it alone.

A Colorado school district up in arms after a teacher wears an anti-Bush button. Pat and Bill debate whether teachers should keep their political beliefs to themselves.

Finally, the mosque money trail: Are some places of worship being used to fund terrorism?

It's all ahead in the next hour of the COUNTDOWN.

In Israel today: a violent reminder the Gulf region must still resolve another conflict, one that is also causing deep divisions around the world.

Here's the COUNTDOWN's Martin Fletcher.

(BEGIN VIDEOTAPE)

MARTIN FLETCHER, NBC CORRESPONDENT: Lester, with Israeli troops in the middle of a tough campaign to stop terrorism, nevertheless, a Palestinian suicide bomber managed to slip into the heart of Israel's third largest city.

(voice-over): 2:17 in the afternoon in Haifa, Northern Israel, bus No. 37 is packed with high school students. Suddenly, a huge blast blows off the roof of the bus. Body parts spray the sidewalk, windows shattered for hundreds of yards, the first suicide bomb in Israel in two months.

The Islamic militants Hamas claimed responsibility. Police said a Palestinian strapped a large bomb to his body filled with nails. He sat for 15 minutes on the bus before blowing himself up -- at least 15 dead, about 10 of them reportedly children aged 14 or 15.

CHEN LIEBERMAN, ISRAELI CITIZEN: There is nothing you can do to control the situation. It's not their fault. It's not our fault. But everyone is suffering. Everyone is dying. And we can't do anything about it.

FLETCHER: But the Israeli army today told the country there was something they could do about a possible gas attack from Iraq, warning everyone to prepare a safe room with gas masks and to seal windows with plastic sheeting. Israeli military sources stress, the real danger isn't from Iraq, but from Palestinian terrorists.

RA'ANAN GISSEN, SPOKESMAN FOR ARIEL SHARON: The level of terrorist activity is at an all-time high.

FLETCHER: The army has stopped two terrorist attacks a day for the last two months and in tough raids against Hamas strongholds, killing 60 Palestinians in almost three weeks.



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(on camera): Israeli helicopters and tanks attacked Gaza in a campaign that is now expected to get even tougher. And Israeli troops have arrested the suicide bomber's father and two brothers for allegedly being part of the plot -- Lester.

(END VIDEOTAPE)

HOLT: Martin Fletcher, thanks.

Concerns about Mideast peace also on the mind of the Vatican: Today, a papal envoy met with President Bush and communicated the pope's message that war could cause instability in that region.

Coming up on the COUNTDOWN@:45, we'll be looking at the end game for the other four permanent members of the Security Council. What is at stake for them as we head into what may be a final U.N. showdown?

Plus, an Iraqi pop singer who has taken the Arab world by storm, now he hopes to be an instrument of peace in America.

And tonight's COUNTDOWN question: Anti-war protests two weeks ago were the largest since the Gulf War, the Kosovo conflict, or the Vietnam War?

The answer on a special "Showdown Lowdown" -- right here on the COUNTDOWN.

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

ANNOUNCER: Coming up on the COUNTDOWN@:45, the Iraqi end game for the big three, France, Germany and Russia. What do these countries stand to gain by blocking U.S. war plans?

He's Elvis and Sinatra rolled into one and has sold more than 30 million C.D.s worldwide. Now this Iraqi pop star is taking on America.

And the anti-war showdown -- tonight, the "Showdown Lowdown" on the global movement for peace -- some of the special stories we're saving for the COUNTDOWN@:45.

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

ANNOUNCER: Ahead on the COUNTDOWN: an Iraqi pop star famous for his Arabic love songs. But today, this Iraqi singer is making a name for himself singing for peace. That's coming up.

Now here again is Lester Holt.

HOLT: Now some of the special stories we've been saving for the COUNTDOWN@:45, tonight, an axis of opposition, France, Russia and Germany, today all three vowing not to allow a U.S.-backed resolution to pass in the Security Council.

So, where do these countries and the other major players in the Security Council stand? And what do they stand to gain or lose depending on the end game? The only U.S. ally on the permanent Security Council, Britain, is under pressure. Tony Blair is pushing the second resolution, remaining firmly in the U.S. camp, despite a public backlash at home.

Blair says he expects the Security Council will unite behind a resolution. And it will help him immensely on the home front, if they do. According to a recent poll, 67 percent of Britons oppose a war if the U.N. isn't backing it.

Moving onto Germany, which is absolutely polarized to Britain, its position, no war at all, even if the U.N. sanctions a second resolution. Today, Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder acknowledged his peace bid might fail. But considering he was just very narrowly reelected on an anti-war stance, Schroeder seemingly cannot back down.

And France has allied itself along Germany, stating that it will use its position to block any second resolution. As a permanent council member, France could even use its veto. Today, the foreign minister laid out the French alternative plan, calling for intensified inspections. France has not ruled out the use of force at some point, but stresses, now is not the right time.

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Another veto-wielding member, China, has been quieter on the situation. However, it does oppose a second resolution and is calling for more time for inspectors. About 60 percent of China's oil comes from the Middle East, so its economy would be vulnerable to price fluctuations during an Iraq war. But Beijing will probably not want to disrupt trade relations with the U.S. by vetoing the resolution, especially when France and Russia could exercise their vetoes instead.

And, finally, let's talk about Russia. Oil is one of its prime concerns because Saddam Hussein has agreed to let it help explore and develop Iraqi oil fields.

Here's more on that story now from our COUNTDOWN producer in Russia.

(BEGIN VIDEOTAPE)

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: I'm Thomas Vonnefield (ph) in Moscow, where Russia has considerable concerns over the way the situation in Iraq unfolds.

First, there are economic issues. Iraq owes Russia an estimated \$8 billion in Soviet-era debt. Beyond that, Russia has signed billions of dollars in oil contracts that will go into effect once U.N. sanctions are lifted. The concern here is that, if the regime of Saddam Hussein is swept aside, the next regime may not honor those interests for Russia.

Then there is the situation tied to stability in the Middle East. Russia is concerned that a war in Iraq may destabilize the overall situation. And last but not least, their U.S.-Russian relations, which are quite good right now -- the last thing president Putin wants to see is those relations damaged because of the situation in Iraq.

So how would the Russians like to see the situation resolved? They've said it many times. They want to see it done peacefully and under the auspices of the United Nations. That means let the current inspection regime continue. They have said it again and again. They don't see any need for a new resolution right now, including the one that's being proposed by the United States. And they've also raised the specter in recent weeks of possibly vetoing any resolution that would lead to the use of force in Iraq -- Lester.

(END VIDEOTAPE)

HOLT: All right, Thomas, thank you.

As we talk about a diplomatic end game, of course, we acknowledge it's anything but a game. Nowhere should that be more obvious than on the streets of Baghdad, a city of five million people now bracing for an attack.

The COUNTDOWN's Ron Allen is there with more on the fears of the Iraqi people.

(BEGIN VIDEOTAPE)

RON ALLEN, NBC CORRESPONDENT: Lester, when you ask, what are the concerns of the Iraqi people, basically, it's the same as people around the world.

Families here want to raise their children in a safe environment. They want good schools. They want to feed their families good nutritious meals. They're tired of 12 years of sanctions and economic hardship. And, of course, they don't want war. They want peace. They continue to say that. They also say they have nothing against America. Their concerns are with America's administration.

The main thing, the main concern, of course, is the sanctions, which, during the past 12 years, have radically changed the society. There was a vibrant and prosperous middle class here before the sanctions took hold before the Gulf War and before the war with Iran during the early 1980s.

Since then, every measure that you could think of quality of life has fallen dramatically here sharply, really decimating the society. So, that's what people say they want most. They want an end to the sanctions. They want peace. And that is, of course, their main concern now, with war seeping more and more inevitable. Some people are taking steps to do what they can to buy a few extra provisions, but people don't have a lot of money to add huge stockpiles of food and water to their basements.



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They are basically taking it one day at a time, hoping that, through someone's intervention or through the good graces of the international community, something will stop America's clear intent to attack this country once again. And, of course, people see this as a continuing war against them that's been going on for some time.

Most of all, I would say here the greatest concern is that people want peace -- Lester, back to you.

(END VIDEOTAPE)

HOLT: All right, Ron Allen in Baghdad, thanks.

Kazem Al-Saher, is still hoping there is a chance for peace. This Iraqi singer, famous for his Arabic love songs, has made a name for himself in the Middle East. Now he is taking on the United States, singing for peace.

Here's Kevin Tibbles.

(BEGIN VIDEOTAPE)

KEVIN TIBBLES, NBC CORRESPONDENT (voice-over): He is Elvis and Sinatra rolled into one, young, handsome, charismatic. Already a cultural icon in the Arab world, Kazem Al-Saher has sold more than 30 million C.D.s worldwide.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: They don't come much bigger than Kazem Saher.

TIBBLES: His music videos are played from Cairo to Kabul, but, these days, he's in the spotlight for another reason. This singing sensation is Iraq's biggest star. And now, as his homeland and the United States stand poised for war, he is crisscrossing America singing for peace.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: The great Kazem Al-Saher.

TIBBLES: A poet and classically trained musician, Kazem is now playing to wildly enthusiastic crowds, hoping to unite two countries, two cultures through music.

Having lived through both the Iran-Iraq and Gulf wars, Kazem knows firsthand the devastation war brings. And while he refuses to speak about the regime of Saddam Hussein, he is anxious to talk about the Iraqi people.

"When the bombs hit, they don't differentiate between the good and the bad," he says. "So innocent people will be killed."

One of 10 children born in a small village north of Baghdad, he wrote his first song at 12, a ballad inspired by a girl. While he is still best known for his love songs, one of Kazem's most popular compositions is a song he wrote not for a woman this time, but for his true love, Baghdad. The song, "A Beauty and His Love," is in such demand, the audience calls on him to sing it two or three times a concert.

"The Iraq we see on television means war. Iraq means terrorism. Iraq means fear to the rest of the world. And this is wrong," says the singer.

Determined to change those perceptions, Kazem put a recording session on hold to tour five American cities. He travels with a 15-piece Middle Eastern orchestra made up entirely of Arab-Americans, all of them hoping their music will serve as an instrument of peace.

(END VIDEOTAPE)

HOLT: And I also had a chance to speak with Kazem Al-Saher and his translator recently and asked him what it's like for an Iraqi to be in the United States right now.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

KAZEM AL-SAHER, IRAQI POP STAR: I think it's the best time for me to come now to give concerts, just to show another face of Iraqi people.

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HOLT: Well, let me ask you, though about Baghdad, this place that you love and clearly have fond memories of. What do you think of when you think that it may be again the place of war?

AL-SAHER: I wish there is no war, because the people there, they are very nice. They have to live the good life, like everyone in the world. They deserve to live the good life.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

HOLT: Kazem Al-Saher, trying to bridge two countries through music.

While the Bush administration appears to be firmly on the road to war, protesters around the world are hoping for an end game that involves peace. That's the focus of tonight's "Showdown Lowdown."

(BEGIN VIDEOTAPE)

HOLT (voice-over): Praying for peace: Appearing before hundreds of the faithful on this Ash Wednesday, Pope John Paul II called for an international day of prayer and fasting against a war in Iraq.

Taking action: Hundreds of thousands of Egyptians took to their capital's streets in protest of the escalating crisis with Iraq. In Spain, one of the countries sponsoring the proposed war resolution, protesters united under the theme, not one hero, not one soldier, not one bullet for this war.

Studying peace: The world's youth want their voices heard on Iraq, too. Thousands of students in this country on up to 200 campuses walked out of class in what was billed as a books-not-bombs strike, while, in Australia, an estimated 15,000 high school protesters took to the streets in Sidney, Adelaide, and Perth.

Fashion statement: There were even protests in Upstate New York over a man's right to wear a pro-peace T-shirt at a local mall. Stephen Downs was arrested after allegedly refusing to take off a T-shirt saying, "Give Peace a Chance."

Now the answer to your COUNTDOWN question. Not since the Vietnam War have there been such massive worldwide protests as those that played out two weeks ago.

Not all of today's protests were anti-war. A group of conservative college students staged an anti-France rally, complete with a life-sized chicken, outside the French Embassy in Washington, D.C.

And that's your "Showdown Lowdown."

(END VIDEOTAPE)

HOLT: It has been a busy hour. There is a lot going on as we appear to be heading to the end game. And the COUNTDOWN is not over yet.

I hope you'll stay tuned for the next hour of COUNTDOWN: IRAQ, when I'll be joined by Pat Buchanan and Bill Press. Also, be sure to tune into the "HARDBALL College Tour" with Chris Matthews at 9:00 Eastern, 8:00 Central. He is at American University tonight. His guests include Democratic Senator Dianne Feinstein and Republican Senator Rick Santorum, a jam-packed prime-time lineup only on MSNBC, NBC News on cable 24/7.

ANNOUNCER: Coming up next on COUNTDOWN: IRAQ, Buchanan and Press talk war with the chair of the House Armed Services Committee. And in a COUNTDOWN "Showdown," Bill and Pat take each other on over a teacher's right to push an anti-Bush message to students.

The COUNTDOWN will return in a moment.

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

ANNOUNCER: Tonight: going it alone? Powell's plea for a larger coalition come as France and Russia flex their veto muscles. Will the U.S. get the U.N. on board? When could a war start? House Armed Services Chairman Duncan Hunter breaks it all down with Pat and Bill.

Bombed on the bus: a deadly attack and now a chilling warning from the Israeli government. Do events in the Middle East signal war on Iraq is imminent?



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Mosque money: A man suspected of bankrolling Osama's terror outfit and the New York mosque he used as a front. Should the war on terror start shaking down American mosques?

HOLT: Welcome back.

From new evidence to a triad of resistance, it's been a day packed with key developments in the showdown with Saddam Hussein. But we begin with developing news on the diplomatic front.

Two members of the Iraqi mission to the United Nations have been expelled from the U.S. for activities deemed harmful to America. The men must leave the country within 72 hours. They've been described as diplomats, but Iraq claims they are security guards.

Also today, Secretary of State Colin Powell warning that Saddam Hussein is trying to divide the international community with the illusion of compliance. Bottom line, Powell says Saddam is up to his old tricks and that the recent destruction of missiles is nothing more than a ruse.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

COLIN POWELL, SECRETARY OF STATE: From recent intelligence, we know that the Iraqi regime intends to declare and destroy only a portion of its banned Al Samoud inventory and that it has in fact ordered the continued production of the missiles that you see being destroyed.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

HOLT: Powell in total disagreement with Hans Blix, who came out and touted Iraq for its recent cooperation, the chief weapons inspector saying, though there are still biological weapons that haven't been accounted for, the Al Samouds are a start.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

HANS BLIX, CHIEF U.N. WEAPONS INSPECTOR: Clearly, the missile is real disarmament. Here, weapons that can be used in war are destroyed in fairly large quantities. There's a whole program and it is the various items that are related to that, like launchers, casting chambers, etcetera. These are being destroyed. Now, that is real disarmament.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

HOLT: And Blix isn't the only one who feels that way, a powerful threesome now vowing to thwart any resolution that would threaten war, France, Russia and Germany, forming a united front today in Paris, all this while General Tommy Franks briefs the president of the United States on plans for the first days of war. The strategy is said to be one of shock and awe that would include simultaneous ground and air strikes. In the opening days alone, the Pentagon plans to drop 10 times the number of bombs it did in the first Gulf War.

And today's developments came with a plea from the pope, President Bush meeting with a special papal envoy, Cardinal Pio Laghi delivering a message straight from the pope that war would be a defeat for humanity, the pope also spreading his message during Ash Wednesday mass in St. Peter's Square today, the pontiff urging followers to heed a day of prayer and fasting against war, many on hand chanting the phrase, "no war."

With the war talk now at a fever pitch, concerns are growing that the U.S. could face retaliation here at home. But just how prepared is the homeland to prevent an act of terror?

The COUNTDOWN's Jim Avila set out to find out.

(BEGIN VIDEOTAPE)

JIM AVILA, NBC NATIONAL CORRESPONDENT (voice-over): The Port of Los Angeles, 43 miles of waterfront, America's busiest. Should the U.S. attack Iraq and the domestic threat level rise dramatically, NBC News has learned the Coast Guard is now prepared to board each of the 15 container ships that enter that critical port every day.

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CAPT. JOHN HOLMES, U.S. COAST GUARD: We will increase our security efforts markedly. There will be certainly things like more ship boardings, more patrol boats on the water.

AVILA: U.S. sources tell NBC News there are even working plans to close the Port of New York by the first day of an American attack and new levels of security also ordered at ports in Boston and Norfolk.

In the air, the FAA has already extended the restricted airspace around Washington, D.C., now a 30-mile radius, Customs Service Black Hawks now patrolling capital skies, the airspace over New York also restricted. On the ground:

DR. DENISE SOCKWELL, VIRGINIA DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC HEALTH: Four, two, eight, two.

AVILA: Denise Sockwell, an epidemiologist, now on the front lines.

SOCKWELL: We are now thrust into the role of being first-responders.

AVILA: A disease detective looking for traces of terrorism through a microscope, her pager on 24 hours a day, seven days a week as she searches for the first sign of a bioterror attack.

SOCKWELL: Our first clue would be when individuals show up to their private physicians or to the emergency department with unusual symptoms.

AVILA (on camera): Despite the dedication of first-responders, there is a serious gap in homeland security, a vulnerability local governments say puts firefighters and police and those in the medical field in danger.

(voice-over): Equipment shortages. In Illinois alone, of the 80,000 first-responders, the men and women assigned to contain a bio or chemical attack, only 2,000 are equipped with masks and protective suits.

JOHN DESTEFANO, MAYOR OF NEW HAVEN: But without the personal protective equipment that we need to supply, they do so at their risk.

AVILA: Americans finding that war means an increased threat, both in the Persian Gulf and on domestic shores.

Jim Avila, NBC News, Chicago.

(END VIDEOTAPE)

HOLT: And that's where we are right now with the headlines on the COUNTDOWN. I'll be back with the latest with the COUNTDOWN@:30.

But now we continue with Pat Buchanan and Bill Press -- fellows.

BILL PRESS, "BUCHANAN & PRESS": All right, good evening, Lester.

And welcome.

The Bush administration wants the U.N. to fall in line and support war, but events here and abroad threaten to distract even Americans from the president's message.

Here's your COUNTDOWN "Rundown" for tonight: a Colorado teacher feeling the heat tonight after wearing an anti-Bush and anti-war pin on a school field trip. Should teachers leave their politics at home, especially as we head off to war? Pat and I will square off on that one in our COUNTDOWN "Showdown."

PAT BUCHANAN, "BUCHANAN & PRESS": Then: A deadly suicide bombing jolts Israel, just as the Bush administration ratchets up the pressure on Iraq. Is it in America's vital interests to keep the lid on the Middle East conflict until war begins? We'll talk about that with a senior Israeli and Palestinian representative.



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PRESS: And on the COUNTDOWN@:45, the al Qaeda money trail leads all the way back to a New York mosque. Should the government crack down on religious organizations?

All that and a whole lot more tonight on the COUNTDOWN.

ANNOUNCER: Also ahead and up next on the COUNTDOWN: the chairman. House Armed Services Chairman Duncan Hunter goes head-to-head with Pat and Bill on what war with Iraq could cost and how it might affect gas prices already climbing past \$3.

And here's the COUNTDOWN question we want you to answer: Will America be at war with Iraq within two weeks? E-mail your thoughts to [question@MSNBC.com](mailto:question@MSNBC.com). And Pat and Bill will read your e-mails later.

You're watching COUNTDOWN: IRAQ.

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

ANNOUNCER: Coming up on the COUNTDOWN@:45, give peace a chance. A T-shirt promoting peace lands one mall shopper in hot water. Now it's a question of free speech.

And it's three strikes and you're out at the Supreme Court. The justices want to shut the revolving prison door for career criminals. But does the punishment fit all crimes?

Just some of the special stories we're saving for you as Bill and Pat face off on the COUNTDOWN@:45.

BUCHANAN: OK.

Right now, we have got Congressman Duncan Hunter, the chairman of the Armed Services Committee, joining us here, Republican.

Duncan, thanks for coming over, old friend.

We got this right off the wire. The British apparently are working on an amendment to that U.S.-backed resolution. It's going to give Iraq more time to disarm. They look like they're getting cold feet. If Duncan Hunter were advising the president, would you tell him to: Look, Mr. president, forget this U.N. game with Angola and Cameroon and give the order and march up to Baghdad and liberate Iraq?

REP. DUNCAN HUNTER (R-CA), ARMED SERVICES COMMITTEE CHAIRMAN: Well, I think the president is doing the right thing, in that he's gone through this entire exercise with the United Nations without appearing to flinch.

That's been important, because, when he shows weakness, people who are lining up and staking their political futures on his leadership are going to similarly start turning, start wavering. So the president has been doing the right thing. He's been going through the exercise, which he said he's going to go through, and he's going to try to accumulate as many allies as possible.

But if he doesn't accumulate them, he's going to act in America's interest. And he's been pretty clear on that, pretty consistent. I think he'll keep doing it.

BUCHANAN: Look, Congressman, is the exercise now over? The French and the Germans and the Russians, the first and third have vetoes. They're going to veto our resolution. The president is trying to buy the votes, understandably, of Cameroon and these little countries. He hasn't got his nine votes. The Brits want to delay it. He wants to get this done. We're losing support internationally.

Do you believe that, after next week, whether he gets the resolution or not, he ought to give the order to march to Baghdad?

HUNTER: I think she give the order when it's the right time to give it, when his troops are in the best position in that theater militarily.

But I think it's pretty clear now, Pat. This is really kind of a decision-making time, not for the president, because he's made his decision. He said, if Saddam doesn't disarm, we're going to disarm him.

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This is a positioning time and a decision-making time for the allies. And so, just like congressmen before a vote, when you know you're going to have to live with your vote for the next several years, you position yourself and you start deciding where you're going to come down on this thing.

And so all these people are making political decisions right now. Now, I think we're going to have some strong allies. I'm amazed that the British have stuck with us as long as they have. Tony Blair has dropped like a rock in the polls. He's hung tough. He's shown some good qualities. The president, though, I think has done exactly the right thing. He's been consistent, been strong. And, basically, it's a decision of the allies. It's not the president's decision at this point.

PRESS: All right, Congressman, the president might have decided what he's going to do if we go. But according to the Drudge Report -- Matt Drudge, who is pretty good about a lot of stuff, including when Pat and I might show up on this network -- Drudge is reporting tonight that this is the night, tonight -- Wednesday night is the night that President Bush is going to make the absolute go or no-go decision. And from then on, it's all the way to Baghdad.

He may not make it public now, right? We may not know it for 10 days. But tonight is the night he's going to decide. You're close to the White House. Can you confirm that?

HUNTER: No. I think the president is going to make this decision. Ultimately, the decision is a pretty lonely decision. But I think he's already made the decision that he is going to go, that either Saddam Hussein disarms or he's going. He hasn't wavered from that. And I think wavering the slightest bit would have been disastrous for what allies we do have on this operation.

PRESS: Well, let me ask you if you can confirm this.

HUNTER: So I can't confirm any tonight-is-the-night stuff that you're hearing.

PRESS: But do you think it's unrealistic or just out of the question that tonight could be the night which would lead us, let's say, in a week, March 13, 14, 15, to be on the way into Baghdad?

HUNTER: Well, we've got a lot of folks in theater. We've got a lot of airpower now in theater, lots of -- we've staged well. There may be some other things the president wants to do before he moves out.

PRESS: When are we going?

HUNTER: And that's going to be his decision.

PRESS: What's your best guess, when we will definitely be in that war?

HUNTER: I don't want to speculate on that. I think that there's a lot. You've got to bring this thing together. And when you do, you have to play your cards very close to your chest. And if the president was signaling to Congress or telegraphing to Congress at this point, I would be surprised.

BUCHANAN: Congressman, the United States is the knight in shining armor going in there. We're going to slay this dragon. We're going to disarm him. We're going to make the region safe. We're going to help democratize it.

And yet the Turks and the Saudis and all our friends aren't even helping us. What in heaven's name is wrong either with our diplomacy or with them that we have so little support? And, in Europe, the whole place is against us.

HUNTER: I think it could best be described, Pat, as, tears of gratitude dry very quickly.

And I talked with Saudi diplomats yesterday and said, how on earth, when you have these images of Saddam Hussein's tanks in third gear coming down on you and that thin red line of Americans gets in their way, called the 82nd Airborne, that your people have forgotten that so quickly and you've got a negative image of America?

But I think that's their problem.

BUCHANAN: It's their problem, but, look...



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HUNTER: I don't think it's our problem.

BUCHANAN: But why are -- these are ungrateful allies. The United States has rescued them, defended them. The Turks have been in NATO. We bribe them with \$30 billion or \$15 billion. They won't help out. What is going on? And doesn't it argue, Duncan, that maybe what we ought to do is: Look, if you don't want our help, you guys solve this problem. We're going home.

HUNTER: Pat, real simple: self-interests, America's national security interests.

I've chaired eight hearings on Iraq now, three of them classified. My judgment is that this guy is about three years away from having a nuclear weapon. When we did go in, in '91, we were surprised. Remember, Sam Nunn and all the crew said: Don't go in. You have got to wait on the sanctions.

And we were surprised when we found out he was about six months away, according to the U.N. then, of having a nuke. I think that he has the inclination to use a nuclear system on Americans, on troops in theater, or, if he could get one into the country, in this country. And I think he's going to have one in about three years, from the information I've seen.

And because of that, all other things, all of our allies falling away, as they've fallen away -- or a lot of them having fallen away -- a lot of people being ungrateful, this is a new dangerous century. And I think the message is very clear to us. We're going to have to have a military that's strong enough to act in our own self-interests.

This president has rebuilt this military, to a large degree. We need to do a lot more. But this budget this year is \$94 billion more than Clinton's last defense budget. So we're doing the right thing.

PRESS: Let me pick up there, if I can. Lot more questions on Iraq, but we only have so much time.

You mentioned the budget. We're looking at, according to administration, a \$300 billion budget deficit. We have got a war. We don't know what it's going to cost, because the administration won't say what it is going to cost, \$100 billion, \$200 billion. And then the president has got a tax cut on top of that of \$684 billion.

Congressman, that's fiscally irresponsible. There's not enough money on the table to pay for all of that. So what goes? The tax cut goes?

HUNTER: Listen, I'm a defense guy. When we're spending 3.4 percent, which is probably the lowest of the our GDP that we've spent on national defense since Pearl Harbor -- John Kennedy spent 9 percent of GDP on defense, 9 percent of this country's income. Ronald Reagan spent 6 percent. We're only spending about 3.4 percent of GDP on defense.

We've learned, after 9/11, if you don't have security, you are not going to have Social Security.

PRESS: But...

HUNTER: We need to spend what is right on national security and making this world right.

And let me just remind you, Bill, you had had the same arguments -- we had the same arguments in 1980 when Reagan rebuilt defense. Because he brought down the Soviet Union, we saved \$1 trillion in the '90s.

PRESS: But, also, Congressman, with all due respect, Ronald Reagan also said, we need a balanced budget amendment. And people like were you out there on the steps of the Congress supporting it. And now the balanced budget is out the window. When did the Republican strategy change and you just spend all the money you want?

HUNTER: But when he was bringing down the Berlin Wall, he didn't have a balanced budget. And he said, there's one thing that's more important than a balanced budget right now. That's a strong defense. I think that same set of values applies right now.

PRESS: Deficits don't matter?

BUCHANAN: Congressman, what's the difference between Clinton and...

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HUNTER: Not in a war.

BUCHANAN: What's the difference between Clinton and Bush on North Korea? They almost knocked our plane out of the sky and almost brought it down. We have sent the B-52s out there. But, quite clearly, they've been provoking us. And the response is Clintonian, is it not?

HUNTER: Well, I think I look at the North Koreans like an unstable guy in a house who has got a lot of hostages. Right now, those hostages...

PRESS: There he is.

HUNTER: ... are the folks in Seoul who are under that artillery fan of North Korea.

You don't give them everything that they want, but you don't stop talking to them. And right now, our focus is and should be on Iraq. And I think it is going to be a mistake if we let ourselves get distracted right now. I think we have got to move through, work the Iraq operation, try to work that unstable guy in the house called North Korea later.

PRESS: Congressman, we don't want to stop talking to you either, but we've got to. We're out of time.

Thanks so much for coming in.

HUNTER: Good to be with you.

PRESS: Congressman Duncan Hunter.

And it's Pat Buchanan and Bill Press. And you're watching the COUNTDOWN.

ANNOUNCER: Much more to come on the COUNTDOWN.

Button-pushing: An anti-Bush button on a schoolteacher's coat turns a Colorado community on its ear. Should schools keep their political opinions out of the classroom? Buchanan and Press go at it in the COUNTDOWN "Showdown."

And later: mosque money. A Muslim place of worship near ground zero is deflecting charges of funding al Qaeda. Should the war on terror increase its focus on American mosques?

Also: the COUNTDOWN question we want you to answer: Is America going to be at war with Iraq within two weeks? E-mail your thoughts to [question@MSNBC.com](mailto:question@MSNBC.com) and Pat and Bill will read your e-mails later.

You're watching COUNTDOWN: IRAQ.

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

ANNOUNCER: Tonight's COUNTDOWN "Showdown": classroom controversy. An anti-Bush message on a schoolteacher's lapel upsets a Colorado community. Should teachers let their students in on their presidential politics?

Buchanan and Press go head-to-head right now on the COUNTDOWN "Showdown."

PRESS: Yes, that's funny, Pat. I thought the First Amendment applied to teachers, too. I guess not.

The truth is, if this teacher were wearing a button that said, "I love George Bush," there would have been not a peep out of any parents, Pat. My advice to the people of Conifer, Colorado, is, if you want to export democracy to Iraq, you ought to start practicing democracy right here at home first.

BUCHANAN: Well, look, these are little kids in a classroom. The teacher come in. On the lapel is an insult to the president of the United States. Some of those kids' dads are probably over there in the Gulf. She has got a captive audience of children, Bill.

You're the type of guy that says, look, the little kids can't say the Pledge of Allegiance to the flag of the United States, but this teacher can impose her dingbat views in a classroom with a captive audience. That is wrong. It is an abuse of power.



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PRESS: Well, first of all, you got your facts wrong. It was not in a classroom. It was on a field trip, OK, Pat. And have you ever been a teacher?

BUCHANAN: No, I have not, Bill.

PRESS: I have. I taught for four years.

And I have to say this, Pat. You know, the best thing for kids is to let their minds work, get their minds working. What this country needs is a debate on this war in every classroom in America. That's the best thing that could happen. And let the kids know where the teacher stands and let the kids make up their own minds.

BUCHANAN: That is an outrage. Look, that is dictatorial liberalism.

PRESS: What, to debate issues, to talk about issues is dictatorship?

BUCHANAN: You have got kids in grammar school. To come in there and impose your views on these kids who are 13 years old, they ought to get politics out of the classroom. These teachers aren't teaching the kids what they ought to know, reading, writing, arithmetic.

PRESS: Absolutely...

BUCHANAN: If you did that sort of thing, it was abuse of power.

PRESS: You know what?

BUCHANAN: And I'm not surprised they bounced you out of that seminary.

(LAUGHTER)

PRESS: I left the seminary on my own because I had other things in mind.

But, Pat, let me tell you something. The dictatorship would not allow the debate in the classroom, Pat.

BUCHANAN: Get it out of the classroom.

PRESS: Democracy doesn't start -- you don't start...

BUCHANAN: Why don't you invite...

PRESS: Let me make a point. You don't start thinking about issues when you're 21 and you vote. You start them in the sixth grade, in the seventh grade. These kids are ready for it. They read the papers. They watch us on television. They want to get involved.

BUCHANAN: You know what you do? You say, tomorrow, we're going to have a little debate in the classroom and you all kids can get up and give your views back and forth. That's fine. But when a teacher walks in with that -- do you know what happened? They told the teacher, you do it again and you're going to let a lot of free time because you're going to be out of a job. And that's exactly ought to happen to them.

PRESS: Actually, that's not true either. You don't have that fact right either. The teacher voluntarily took her pin off, Pat. People like you...

BUCHANAN: She was told she abused those kids.

PRESS: No, she had already taken it off. Check your facts.

BUCHANAN: But she was told she abused them.

PRESS: People like you want to treat kids like mushrooms. You feed them B.S. and you keep them in the dark. That's not the way teachers ought to do it.

BUCHANAN: She was feeding them. That's just what she was feeding them. Liberal B.S.

PRESS: All right, that's it for now, folks.

Still coming up on the COUNTDOWN, Lester Holt is going to be up next with the latest headlines on the COUNTDOWN@:30.

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And then, today, another horrific suicide bombing in Haifa; and another hot debate on the Middle East -- right here next on the COUNTDOWN.

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

ANNOUNCER: Here's the COUNTDOWN question we want you to answer. Will the United States be at war with Iraq within two weeks? E-mail your thoughts to [question@msnbc.com](mailto:question@msnbc.com) and Pat and Bill will read your e-mails later.

Now here's your "COUNTDOWN at 30."

HOLT: Welcome back. Buchanan and Press will be back in a moment. But first, here's your "COUNTDOWN at 30."

Secretary of State Colin Powell says Iraq is still deceiving inspectors by hiding some of those illegal Al Samoud missiles. Powell says Saddam will never fully disarm as long as the international community is split on its next step.

But France, Russia and Germany have thrown a major roadblock in the way. All three have come out in opposition to a second resolution, saying they still want more time for inspections.

If there is military action, Saddam's regime may respond with terrorist attacks, according to one report. It's "The LA Times," reporting Iraqi sleeper cells are in place, poised to strike in the event of war.

On the "COUNTDOWN at 45," Bill Press and Pat Buchanan take on an outspoken critic of Islam who says the U.S. should crack down on money collected at mosques.

Now the COUNTDOWN continues with Buchanan and Press.

BUCHANAN: OK. Suicide bombing today, folks, in Haifa, killed 15 and wounded 40 -- an atrocity. It is the first to occur in the last two months. And here to discuss it are Mark Regev, Israeli embassy spokesman and also an old friend of this program, Hassan Abdel Rahman, chief PLO U.S. representative.

Mark Regev, let me ask you, I want to put some numbers up on the chart. We've got 29 months of violence here, 2,160 Palestinians dead, 743 Israelis killed. Doesn't this indicate that Ariel Sharon's policy, basically, of a hard line, tough line, going into the West Bank, going into Gaza, 29 months, has failed?

MARK REGEV, ISRAELI EMBASSY SPOKESMAN: On the contrary. As much as today is terrible, with those 15 people killed, and it's very sad, of course -- I mean, a lot of them are high school kids, college students.

BUCHANAN: Right.

REGEV: One of them, an American. Terrible. But we used to have one of these a day. Now we haven't had one for two months. Our feeling is the strategy is working. And though there's no iron-clad solution to terrorism, there's no way to hermetically stop all terrorists, the feeling is that we have substantially stabilized the situation, that we are managing to be proactive, to make the terrorists play defense instead of us all the time wondering when the next suicide bombing is going to happen, and that we are winning this.

PRESS: Mr. Rahman, let me ask you -- these suicide bombings are inhumane. They are immoral. They clearly hurt the Palestinian cause. Why don't you just put out the word, once and for all, stop the suicide bombings? There hasn't been one, as Mark said, for two months, which proves you can control them when you want to. Why don't you just stop them altogether?

HASSAN ABDEL RAHMAN, CHIEF PLO REP. IN U.S.: First of all, I agree that it is inhumane, and we condemn any act of violence that is directed against civilians. But Mr. Regev did not tell you that in the last two months, 90 Palestinians were killed. Most of them are children and women.

You cannot control a population that is under constant attack, that its lives, its property has been destroyed by Israel. There has to be a reaction somehow. That's why we believe that the policies of Mr. Sharon are responsible for this outrageous action by some Palestinians. Mr. Regev says that they are



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successful. Successful in doing what? In killing more Palestinians? In destroying more Palestinian homes? In making the Palestinians poor, dispossessed? That's what they succeeded in doing?

REGEV: Well, the primary job of any democratic government is to protect its own citizens. That's the job of the president here in the United States. That's the job of the prime minister in Israel.

RAHMAN: By killing others?

REGEV: I didn't interrupt you, sir.

RAHMAN: Yes. Go ahead.

REGEV: The (UNINTELLIGIBLE) thing is this. We have substantially stabilized the situation. It's very important to remember that what we're trying to do is protect Israelis from murderous gangs, whether it's Hamas or Islamic Jihad. I wish we didn't have to be proactive. I wish Arafat and his regime lived up to their responsibilities to the United States, to the world, to reign in these terror groups. Unfortunately, Pat, you'd said before that we had two months without terrorism. It's not because the terrorists weren't trying. They were trying every day. We, by our proactive strategy, were stopping them effectively.

BUCHANAN: Mark -- Mark, look, the terrorists' conduct...

(CROSSTALK)

RAHMAN: I would like to answer to that. First of all, I said that Israel controls three million Palestinians, turning their life into hell on a daily basis. Seventy percent of the Palestinians are unemployed. The average income of the Palestinians went down 70 percent. Israel has 50,000 soldiers and about 5,000 tanks in the West Bank and Gaza. It destroyed the whole Palestinian security infrastructure, and now is asking the Palestinians who have nothing to do -- nothing to fight with, to fight terrorism, when they have 50,000 soldiers, and they have destroyed so many Palestinians, and they cannot control it, and they want us control it! [tilde]

You know how you control it? By getting the hell out of the Palestinian territories and let the Palestinians live free because you cannot have occupation and peace together.

REGEV: I would answer very simply. I know the Palestinian people suffer, and there's a human tragedy, an ongoing human tragedy. The question is why do the Palestinians suffer? And the answer is very clear...

RAHMAN: Because there is occupation.

REGEV: They have a corrupt, dictatorial regime.

RAHMAN: Because they have occupation!

(CROSSTALK)

RAHMAN: Yes, I know, but I'm telling you why.

REGEV: They have a regime that is non-elected. They have a regime that is corrupt. They have a regime that is extreme...

BUCHANAN: Mark, what's the cost...

REGEV: ... that rejected every peace offer that was offered in the past...

RAHMAN: Well...

REGEV: ... a regime that, unfortunately, is hand in hand with terrorists like Hamas and the al Aqsa. You have a regime where the security services who are supposed to prevent terrorism are in bed with the terrorists.

BUCHANAN: Mark -- Mark, let me interrupt you. Terrible is horrible. Everybody here agrees.

RAHMAN: Me, too!

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BUCHANAN: But what is the cause of the war? Is it not the Israeli occupation of lands that belong to the Palestinian people and continued encroachments, settlements moving further and further, moving further away any dream of a Palestinian homeland? Isn't that ultimately the cause of the war?

REGEV: The Israeli government is on record favoring a Palestinian state. It was only just two years ago that we talked about pulling out of most of the West Bank and Gaza. The point being is this. The current Palestinian leadership has proven itself to be incapable of a historic compromise, of a fair compromise.

And it's not I that says so. I think the Western world today, headed by President Bush, they say the current leadership of the Palestinian people has led their people down a dead alley. It's a leadership involved in terrorism. It's a corrupt leadership, where money that's donated to help all Palestinians is siphoned off, sent to Swiss bank accounts. I don't say so, the Arab people say so!

PRESS: Let me pick up there with a question to you...

RAHMAN: No amount of accusations to the Palestinian authority justifies what Israel is doing to the Palestinian people. No amount of talk about the corruption of the Palestinian authority justifies what Israel is doing to the Palestinian people. Nothing justifies occupation, my friend.

PRESS: But let me ask...

RAHMAN: Get out of the Palestinian territories, and nobody will attack you. But if you have...

REGEV: But if you did the 467...

RAHMAN: If you have army in the Palestinian villages, towns, controlling Palestinian lives, making Palestinian peoples' life hell, they are going to fight back.

PRESS: Well, let me just get a question here.

RAHMAN: Yes?

PRESS: Isn't it apparent that Yasir Arafat is totally infective today? Can't control his territory, can't control his people, can't get anything done even for the good of his cause, a cause, let's say, that we all believe in, a Palestinian state. Shouldn't he step down and let somebody else step up there who has more confidence of the world's leaders?

RAHMAN: I think you are mixing...

PRESS: And get something done.

RAHMAN: ... two things here. First of all, the issue of Yasir Arafat and his leadership is a Palestinian issue. Regardless -- what we think of Arafat and what we want to do with Arafat, that's our problem. But that does not give Israel...

PRESS: Then why don't you get somebody else in there?

RAHMAN: That does not give Israel a right to come and control our lives and build Jewish settlements in Palestinian territories. How can -- did you look at the program of your new government? Did you see it?

REGEV: Of course. We are...

RAHMAN: It calls for building new settlements, my friend!

REGEV: No, no, no.

RAHMAN: Any government that wants peace does not do this!

BUCHANAN: All right, Mark, I have a question for you. I've looked at the numbers. There are 4.4 million Palestinians west of the Jordan River and about 5.5 million Jewish Israelis west. In 2025, it will be 8 million Palestinian people and 6 million or 7 million Jewish Israelis by present birth rates. You're either going to cease to be democratic and have to repress these people, or you're going to cease to be



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Jewish if you become totally democratic because they'll -- the Palestinians will out-vote you. Don't you have to get out? And if you've got to get out of the West Bank, why not sooner rather than later and stop these horrific things in Haifa and horrific things in Gaza?

REGEV: I agree with much of your analysis, Pat. And remember, the whole peace process that we've come to know was based on the principle of land for peace.

BUCHANAN: But you...

REGEV: And Israel gave back...

(CROSSTALK)

BUCHANAN: Sharon...

REGEV: We gave back 40...

BUCHANAN: Sharon has rejected Oslo! He rejects the Saudi plan. He rejects the Camp David plan!

REGEV: And he's been invited by president...

BUCHANAN: He rejects the Taba plan!

REGEV: ... Mubarak to Israel...

(CROSSTALK)

RAHMAN: ... continues to build settlements...

REGEV: Can I answer the question, please?

REGEV: ... in the Palestinian territories!

PRESS: All right, we're going to...

(CROSSTALK)

RAHMAN: How can you -- how can you build settlements...

BUCHANAN: Let him answer it. My apologies. Let him answer.

REGEV: My answer this way. In the framework of the peace process, Israel gave back some 40 percent of the West Bank and Gaza to the Palestinians, where 90 percent of the Palestinians live. We were willing for a much greater compromise. But territories handed over to the Palestinians for peace became bases of terror, where groups like Hamas, Islamic Jihad, al Aqsa Brigades conducted suicide operations. "Land for peace" became a bad joke. It became land for terrorism.

What motivation does any sane Israeli government have to pull out...

(CROSSTALK)

REGEV: ... to give more land to the Palestinians -- to give more land to the Palestinians when land already under their control is a base for terrorism? It's like Taliban territory!

PRESS: Hold. Hold, Mr. Rahman.

REGEV: These gangs work there without any interference!

PRESS: Mr. Rahman, 30 seconds.

RAHMAN: But you know, there's a state terrorism conducted by Israel. The Israeli army is involved in terrorism against Palestinian civilians. You have to look at "The Washington Post" today. A woman nine months pregnant with her nine children, the home is demolished over her and her family. Is this the act of a democratic, civilized army, Mr. Regev?

REGEV: Mr. Rahman...

RAHMAN: I would be ashamed to represent a government...

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REGEV: On the contrary!

RAHMAN: ... that has an army that is occupying other people!

REGEV: Can I just answer that?

RAHMAN: I would be ashamed!

PRESS: I wish we had...

REGEV: I'd just like to answer that point very quickly. The Israel army...

PRESS: Very quickly.

REGEV: ... makes every effort not to hurt civilians. Unfortunately...

RAHMAN: Oh, but they do hurt!

REGEV: ... the Palestinian side...

(CROSSTALK)

REGEV: ... like the Iraqi side, uses human shields...

(CROSSTALK)

REGEV: Arafat uses his population...

PRESS: Gentlemen, thank you. Thank you.

REGEV: ... as a human shield!

RAHMAN: Come on!

PRESS: Thank you. I wish we should settle it all tonight, but we're not going to because we're out of time. Mark Regev, thank you so much for coming in.

REGEV: Thank you.

HOLT: Hassan Rahman, thank you for being here.

Buchanan and Press. You're watching the COUNTDOWN.

ANNOUNCER: Still coming your way on "the COUNTDOWN at 45": Give peace a chance. How wearing an anti-war T-shirt got one shopper arrested in a mall. And: Three strikes and you're out, says the Supreme Court, upholding a controversial California law. All that's coming your way on "the COUNTDOWN at 45."

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

PRESS: We're back with Buchanan and Press on COUNTDOWN: IRAQ. Here now is your "COUNTDOWN at 45."

Today the U.S. Supreme court striking down a challenge to California's "Three strikes and you're out" law. The high court ruled 5-to-4 that 25 years to life is not too harsh for a three-time criminal. Today's ruling was based partly on the appeal of a small-time crook who shoplifted three golf clubs.

Pat, I thought one of the first things about justice was the punishment fits the crime.

BUCHANAN: OK.

PRESS: In California now, you could get as much time for stealing a slice of pizza or three golf clubs as you can get for murder or for hijacking a plane. This is nonsense!

BUCHANAN: You know how it came about? The voters of California voted in a referendum to make it law!

PRESS: They're always right?



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BUCHANAN: Do you now want the Supreme Court to overturn your law?

PRESS: They're always right?

BUCHANAN: Why didn't your Democratic legislature and governor overturn it? And if you want to let the guy go...

PRESS: Hey...

BUCHANAN: ... that stole the golf clubs, get Gray Davis to pardon him...

PRESS: Yes?

BUCHANAN: ... just like your boy pardoned Marc Rich!

PRESS: Oh, how about medical marijuana? They voted for that, too. All right. And now...

BUCHANAN: Well, you were for that.

PRESS: ... here's another one. A big rally up at the Crossgates Mall outside of Albany, New York, today, about 100 people protesting the arrest of a guy who was arrested for wearing a "Give peace a chance" T-shirt in the mall. The mall "Walk for Peace" was organized after that 61-year-old lawyer charged with trespassing at the mall because he refused to take -- he refused to -- I can't believe this! He refused to take off his T-shirt that said "Give peace a chance."

You know what somebody ought to do? Somebody ought to go up there and paint a swastika on the side of that mall. This thing is run by Nazis! Don't they know what the freedom of speech is all about? You can't wear a damn T-shirt that says, "Give peace a chance?"

BUCHANAN: Let me tell you what happened. Let me give you the facts. These two mall rats went in there, they got these -- bought these T-shirts. They're provocative. They walked down the mall...

PRESS: What's provocative about "Give peace a chance"?

BUCHANAN: It's a private mall! It's a private mall, and the guy said, Look, this is not Sproull (ph) Plaza at Berkeley! Get outta here, fella! It's private property!

PRESS: Pat, they were sitting there, eating a sandwich. What's provocative about wearing a T-shirt and eating a sandwich that also says...

BUCHANAN: You found out!

PRESS: ... "Peace on earth"?

BUCHANAN: They're gone!

PRESS: Saint Luke. You can't even -- I guess you can't even read the New Testament in this place.

BUCHANAN: Private -- private property!

PRESS: All right, I'll tell you, Pat, some day. All right, now tonight, moving right along, serious questions about whether mosques in America are helping -- yes, helping Osama bin Laden. The FBI says businessmen who worshiped at this mosque in Brooklyn gave millions of bucks directly to al Qaeda.

BUCHANAN: Cleric from Yemen, Sheik Mohammed al Hasan al Moayad, was arrested in January during an FBI sting operation in Germany. The information on his arrest was only made public yesterday. Authorities say he boasted that he provided bin Laden with recruits, weapons and money collected at the Brooklyn mosque.

PRESS: So tonight we debate that issue. Should the government crack down on mosques here in America? Joining us is James Yacovelli of the Family Policy Network.

Mr. Yacovelli, thanks for being there. I want to ask you, first of all, there are some 1,200 mosques in the United States. Surely, you would have to agree that the great majority of them are just innocent places of worship, and the government ought to simply butt out.

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JAMES YACOVELLI, FAMILY POLICY NETWORK: Well, I think what we've seen here, and as "The Post" reported in the news story -- initially, I was shocked when I read it because here is New Yorkers planning the attack and funding terrorists against fellow New Yorkers. I would agree with the number of mosques we have. Of course, not all of them are going to be terrorist cells. However, this is a shocking revelation. We now have the freedoms of this country, where we allow people of different faiths and nationalities to enjoy the freedoms that we all have enjoyed. But yet now it's starting to turn ugly. And I applaud the FBI for their unbelievable attention to detail and to pursue this all over. So...

BUCHANAN: Mr. Yacovelli...

YACOVELLI: Yes, sir?

BUCHANAN: ... so do I applaud the FBI. I think they did an excellent job here.

YACOVELLI: Absolutely.

BUCHANAN: And clearly, it looks like some terrorists were fiddling around in that mosque, and I'm glad we got them. But Bill mentioned 1,200 mosques. The president of the United States said Islam is a religion of peace. If you take a look at the Arabs and the Muslim people in the United States, they are a law-abiding people. 9/11 was done by outsiders who came in this country, Islamic terrorists, to commit murder. Isn't it unfair to brand the Islamic people in this country and the billion of them around the world as terrorists, when a tiny, tiny number are?

YACOVELLI: I don't think we can use a broad brush, like you were saying. Yes, we don't want to label everyone. But we have to go back to what the Quran teaches. And we have to go back to what we've seen in this country since 9/11. And we need to see, as you were speaking earlier about the troubles that still exist in the Holy Land, is that there's still that group that hold onto those teachings of Mohammed, who started out peacefully but later began to be extremely violent and said, Wherever you find the infidels, slay them. And...

BUCHANAN: But don't we have to hold onto our American teachings, which says, Let's run down the killers, let's run down the terrorists, let's kick out of the country...

YACOVELLI: Right.

BUCHANAN: ... the incendiaries, but you know, the vast majority are good people. And we got to be true to our own traditions here in the United States, which are tolerance, frankly, and friendship for folks of different faiths.

YACOVELLI: We don't need to be reactionary. What we need to do is be logical and go after those that commit atrocities and are -- the FBI has done -- I mean, it's just phenomenal, what they've done. And sure, they need to investigate this mosque, investigate these donors, find out who these businessmen are that had this kind of connections and are willing to do it.

But I would be very nervous if I was an Islamic American because I know that my neighbors will now look suspiciously on me. And we don't want to start a fear. But God help us if we ever have suicide bombers. But don't ever forget what Mohammed taught in the Quran and the Hadith and how his hate and vitriol roll towards Jews and Christians has never ended, and it continues to allow and to fuel this type of ideology and rhetoric and also action.

PRESS: Mr. Yacovelli, look, I condemn terrorists as fast as the next guy.

YACOVELLI: Right.

PRESS: But it just seems -- I mean, I don't remember anybody going after Catholic churches up in Boston when they were collecting money for the IRA. Where were you then? The last time I saw you, you were saying the kids down at the University of North Carolina couldn't read a book on Islam.

YACOVELLI: No, we said they could read a book...

PRESS: Isn't this -- isn't this just a...



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YACOVELLI: ... but it needed to be voluntary.

PRESS: Isn't this just part of the drive to go after all Muslims, consider all Muslims terrorists after 9/11, and you're at the head of it?

YACOVELLI: Well, I -- I don't think I have that much power. If I did...

PRESS: Well, you're part of it, then.

YACOVELLI: What I'm trying to point out is that, no, we don't need to go after all Muslims, but we need to go after those that are -- as Pat said, that are involved in terrorism.

HOLT: But why are we just targeting mosques? There's other churches that are raising money around here for questionable organizations either in Latin America or in the Philippines or...

(CROSSTALK)

PRESS: ... Northern Ireland.

YACOVELLI: Are they directly responsible for terrorist organizations, or are you making a broad statement?

PRESS: I bet if you looked at it, you could find it.

YACOVELLI: Well, I don't want to make generalities based on that. We have to go with the facts and use logical, conclusive, deductive reasoning when it comes to these type of issues.

BUCHANAN: Mr. Yacovelli, do you agree with the evangelical leaders who said a little while ago that Mohammed himself was a terrorist and this is basically a wicked and murderous faith...

YACOVELLI: Well, I think...

BUCHANAN: ... Islam itself? And first, do you agree with that? And second, even if you believe something like, that do you think it is the politic thing to do in the present environment to be insulting the faith of a billion people?

YACOVELLI: Well, I think we're on very trepidations ground, I should say, the least, in terms of how we treat our Muslims Americans and our -- and Muslims all over the world. What we've seen since 9/11 is this Islamic pride within these cell groups, where they enjoy inflicting harm on those nations that either support Israel or are anti-Muslim.

Now, to go back to your first question, do I believe that Mohammed was a terrorist? Well, you have to go back and look historically at what he did and what he said. His last dying breath was -- his comment was, Find the infidel and slay him.

PRESS: All right, Mr...

YACOVELLI: So I contrast that with what Jesus says, as a Christian, who said on the cross, as he was dying, Forgive them for they know not what they do. So first in that. On the second point...

PRESS: All right, I'm afraid we're out of time, Mr. Yacovelli.

YACOVELLI: OK.

PRESS: Thank you so much for joining us.

(CROSSTALK)

PRESS: I think we've got your answer.

And now, folks, it's time for our COUNTDOWN question. We've been asking you all day if you think we'll be at war in two weeks' time. Pat, the first one's from Bobbi.

BUCHANAN: OK, Bobbi says, "I hope so. I've been ready to wipe out Saddam, along with the terrorists who plan to harm us. President Bush doesn't want to go to war, but knows we must go to

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preserve the American way of life, along with our safety. War has to occur, and I hope it will be by next week."

PRESS: And now here's Richard. "The way the rhetoric is building, it seems that war is not only inevitable but imminent. I would bet that it is March 15 or before."

Thanks for your e-mails, and that's it for tonight, folks. Thanks for watching.

Tomorrow on the COUNTDOWN: Tony Blair's going to try to bridge the generation gap by going on MTV, like Bill Clinton, to win support for the war. Do you think it's going to work? We'll find out tomorrow. But now here's Lester Holt with more of what's coming up tomorrow on COUNTDOWN: IRAQ.

HOLT: Bill and Pat, thanks. It's where things stand. Let's take a look at COUNTDOWN tomorrow, Thursday. A U.S. Army specialist wounded in an ambush of U.S. forces in Afghanistan last March. Now, one year after the attack, he's back in action. He's reenlisted for another tour of duty. We'll talk to him tomorrow on COUNTDOWN: IRAQ.

The COUNTDOWN'll continue after this.

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

HOLT: We're back on the COUNTDOWN. Joining me now is MSNBC's Joe Scarborough, host of "MSNBC REPORTS."

Joe, what have you got coming up an hour from now?

JOE SCARBOROUGH, HOST: How're you doing, Lester? Starting at 10:00 PM Eastern, we're going to be following several stories for you. First of all, Secretary of State Powell unleashed the dogs on Saddam today, and it looks like the White House is gearing up for war. We're also going to be talking about a governor's Bible study classes off hours but in the statehouse. It's got some atheists up in arms. And of course, our "Capitol Offense," where we report about how Congress is wasting your tax dollars. And also, Lester, we're going to be breaking a story about a member of Congress who compares Osama bin Laden to George Washington. You won't want to miss that one. It's 10:00 PM Eastern on MSNBC REPORTS.

HOLT: Government wasting our dollars, our tax dollars?

SCARBOROUGH: Can you believe that, Lester? I mean, it's breaking news every night.

HOLT: All right, Joe. We'll catch you an hour from now.

Thanks, everybody, for watching COUNTDOWN: IRAQ. Up next, Chris Matthews and the "HARDBALL" college tour at American University with Senator Dianne Feinstein and Senator Rick Santorum.

Have a good night, everyone. We'll catch you tomorrow.

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